Matt Wagner:

Welcome to the Main Street Business Insight Podcast. I'm your host, Matt Wagner, Chief Program Officer at Main Street America, a nonprofit leading a collaborative movement dedicated to strengthening communities through place-based economic development and community preservation. Each week, join me as I travel the country and take a deep dive into the personal journeys of downtown and neighborhood entrepreneurs. The stories that far too often go unnoticed and unheard. Whether you're a small business owner who wants to learn from your peers or community leader looking to better support your local business base, Main Street Business Insights is here to provide you with the tools, strategies, and personal stories to help you and all of your Main Street businesses thrive. So subscribe now and tune in every Wednesday to get inspired by the individuals driving our communities forward.

Welcome everyone to another episode of the Main Street Business Insight Podcast. So I'm here in Livingston, Montana as part of our doubleheader episode I'm calling it because it's two podcasts in one day. It's just been wonderful already and we're in for a true delight here because I'm with James Langteaux, who's the owner of Trû North café. I just ate there and you all have to go there. Avocado toast, this Maple Bacon, did I get that correct?

James Langteaux:

And bourbon bacon.

Matt Wagner:

Oh my gosh. Off the charts fantastic. I felt like maybe I should be kind of like a food show critic kind of thing. It felt that way because James kept bringing me different drinks to try, not alcoholic.

James Langteaux:

You got to grease the wheels.

Matt Wagner:

You got to grease the wheels a little bit, entertain the audience, but it was wonderful. But now we're going to do a little bit more chatting with James about the business side of things and less about me eating there. But it was funny because James and I had a conversation as I do with many of the guests just to kind of get to know each other before we chatted, and the one amazing thing that James and I, I think, immediately picked up about his story in particular was a reflection back to my younger days, the early 1990s, there was this TV show called Northern Exposure. Maybe some of you are familiar with it, but the premise was basically this small town in Alaska, this big city young doctor comes to town, and sort of the interesting interlude of these wonderful quirky characters and this big city doctor coming into town and sort of the convergence of what it means to be a community when maybe your style, your flair is somewhat different, but just the intersection of different people. And I felt that in talking with James and his experience of coming to Livingston during the pandemic. And so James, welcome to the show.

James Langteaux:

Thank you.

Matt Wagner:

Thanks for having me. Really appreciate it.

James Langteaux:

Thank you for having me. It's an honor. And on the Northern Exposures thing, it happens to be one of my very favorite shows, and I almost named Trû North Northern Exposure.

Matt Wagner:

That's right, I forgot about that part of it. So yes, I was pretty close in my analogy there. But let's talk a little bit about your journey to Livingston coming from Southern California, and during the pandemic, a lot of different people moving around the country, and how that experience and that transition really influenced your perspective on the cafe itself.

James Langteaux:

Sure. Well, it's interesting, I didn't realize this, but there is not a lot of love for Californians here in Montana. So first of all, outsiders in general, California, absolute worst, LA, the worst of the worst.

Matt Wagner:

You're at the third tier right now.

James Langteaux:

I tried really hard not to overplay that's where I'm from because I'm actually from Wisconsin, which I use a lot. I grew up in Wisconsin.

Matt Wagner:

I'm not sure I actually knew that because obviously I didn't grow up in Wisconsin, but I spent 30 years in Wisconsin.

James Langteaux:

Did you?

Matt Wagner:

Yes, yes. See folks, you're seeing this for the first time. We don't cover everything.

James Langteaux:

Oh, great, where?

Matt Wagner:

Milwaukee [inaudible 00:04:18].

James Langteaux:

Okay. I went to college in Madison.

Matt Wagner:

Oh my gosh.

James Langteaux:

So anyway, so I'm a small town boy, but got into television and wrote a lot of books and did TV my whole life, so it necessitated that I live in Los Angeles. And I was teaching at the LA Film School, and I'm going to just, you can edit this if you'd like. I was walking-

Matt Wagner:

We don't edit, James.

James Langteaux:

Great. I was walking my pit bull in Hollywood about a year before the pandemic. And I don't know what possessed me, I'm not religious, I'm spiritual, and I just said out loud, out loud, God, I'm ready to go wherever you want and I'll do whatever you want. And I immediately got choked up and I was like, wow, something just happened. I called my mom.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, very profound.

James Langteaux:

Very profound. Like I'll never forget it. I get a little choked up even repeating it. Called my mom and said, "Hey, I just said this to God." She goes, "Oh, that's a damn dangerous thing to say to God." So note that, a year later the pandemic is announced in I believe it was March of 2020.

Matt Wagner:

That's correct, yeah.

James Langteaux:

And around the 17th of March, at the very beginning of the pandemic, they started talking about closing California down and closing the borders and blah, blah, blah. And I sat bolt upright in bed at 6:00 AM and I thought, oh, I have a friend who lives somewhere called Paradise Valley. I didn't know where that was, I barely knew where Montana was. I thought it was kind of where South Dakota is.

Matt Wagner:

It's over there somewhere.

James Langteaux:

It's somewhere. And I texted her and I didn't expect an answer right away because it's 6:00 in the morning, she's kind of a hippie who follows fish around. Her responses can be weeks. Two minutes later, "How soon can you get here?" And then she was on me all day long. Anyway, to make a long story short, I packed up the truck and the pit bull and headed north, had no warm clothes, had to keep stopping as the temperature decreased and got hats-

Matt Wagner:

Layerings.

James Langteaux:

... Right, jacket, gloves, and when I got here, it was snow in March. And she put me on the side of a mountain in an Airstream trailer. I had to hike a quarter of a mile up to use the bathroom and shower in the snow. My pit bull was a Kardashian, hated it. Her foot hit the snow and went, oh hell no. Hated it. So after two weeks I said I'm freezing to death, we're spooning with a pit bull to stay alive. So she brought me into Livingston, which I had never heard of in my life. My jaw dropped. The beauty. We just witnessed the mountains together, the sheer beauty.

Matt Wagner:

Stunning, Stunning.

James Langteaux:

It looks like a film set, it honestly does.

Matt Wagner:

It does, yep.

James Langteaux:

And the mountain at the end of Main Street is just breathtaking and I just immediately felt home here. I've been running from small towns ever since I left my small town. Hated it and couldn't wait to be a big city boy. And Livingston called my name and I immediately just felt like I needed to be here. I accidentally opened a cafe in the very beginning of the pandemic. That's another long story. And immediately it started becoming really busy and we kind of opted out of the pandemic here. We just ran life as pretty much usual. We're careful. And I created a spot. I called it Trû North because I wanted to create a spot in the middle of all this chaos. I didn't know what was going on, how long this would last. I thought if people can find their true north, their purpose, their community, their God, their creator, whatever it is to you, that's what I wanted this place to be. Just this true north in the middle of chaos.

Matt Wagner:

How do you go from someone that's in the entertainment industry to I'm going to have a business, it's going to be a restaurant, cafe. That's a kind of big leap. What was calling you to that?

James Langteaux:

I think, well, I've never worked in a restaurant, weirdly, for the record, but they sent me all over the world for television programs to film and host. And so I ate in many, many countries and many fine restaurants and so I always took notes of things I liked and flavors and elements. And I have always been a little bit of an aesthetic and I love food and have cooked since I was four. I was dropped off just outside the womb and raised by wolves, so I had to cook to survive. I would climb up the drawers to get to the stove. But not trained. And so my friend's dad that I came to visit had a little cafe that was basically shuttered at the beginning of the pandemic and I asked if I could sleep in there one weekend to get out of that cold trailer. That's the cafe.

Matt Wagner:

Wow, this is hardcore.

James Langteaux:

Yep. So I'm sleeping on the couch in what is now Trû North café. And I woke up one morning and I thought, I bet I could help fix this. And my friend, her dad had left. She hated the winters. So I called him and he said, James, why don't you stay for the month of April and you run it and any money you make, you keep and don't pay any bills.

Matt Wagner:

So you kind of just reopen it. I'm going to run it for a month and see what happens.

James Langteaux:

From a friend. And it was very hippie and vegan and I was like, this isn't Montana. So what I did, and I think this might be a key, is I think missionaries make the mistake of barging into cultures and telling them about their white god.

Matt Wagner:

Being a know-it-all.

James Langteaux:

Right. And I didn't want to do that. I wandered the city for weeks walking my dog and would stop people on the street and say, if you could have a cafe in town, what would you want? And they would describe, oh, we want bacon and we want a place that's cozy and we want a place that there's community, we love fireplaces, we love character. And they just described what they wanted, not what James thought Livingston needed. And that might be sort of the key that brought us initial success was let's meet the need here rather than tell them what they need to hear.

Matt Wagner:

One of the things that I quickly learned about you is you understand the art of storytelling. But what's I think fascinating and what I discovered in our conversation, but also just now being in the cafe itself, is that in many ways you use your menu, the drinks that you make, the food that you make, to tell a story. It tells a story probably about you, about sort of the intersection of this community in you. Could you talk a little bit about how you think of storytelling and the role it plays in the business?

James Langteaux:

Absolutely, absolutely. Neurocinematics is a great concept. I don't know if we talked about that, but there's a book, I think it's called Neurocinematics, and it's basically how humans react to plot. It's fascinating. When we start to hear a plot, we release endorphins and we immediately drop our walls and barriers. We lean in because we want to hear what's next. We're engaged. And when there's a plot, when there's a story, you remember facts seven times more than you do if I just said here's seven facts. You remember seven times more when there's a plot involved. So I immediately knew that I needed to tell stories. Every week I get compliments on the menu. People are like this menu's so damn funny and that sign that says "Go to McDonald's, we're not fast food", people comment on all that.

Matt Wagner:

Or he plays Purple Rain with one of the drinks.

James Langteaux:

If you order the Purple Rain, I interrupt the whole restaurant, make an announcement, and blast Purple Rain. People sing, they dance, it's kind of fun. So yes, I started immediately to realize, and it was sort of by just trying it, I developed this drink called the Iced Maple Mountain Cloud. It's our signature beverage and there's a story that comes with it. I tell people, hey, middle of the night, this came to me in a dream. I was in my pajamas, 2:00 A.M., rode my motorcycle over to the cafe, made the first one. They just lean in and they order it every time. And then it's a spectacular drink, so you have to deliver the goods. You can tell a good story-

Matt Wagner:

Correct, you can't disappoint.

James Langteaux:

... You can't disappoint and you have to match the experience with the product. And so that drink put me on the map, and then I started embellishing a little on certain things and just built stories and told stories.

Matt Wagner:

There can be a little fiction with the story, I mean that's part of it.

James Langteaux:

Absolutely. This is based on a true story.

Matt Wagner:

Exactly, exactly, as every movie will indicate.

James Langteaux:

So I found the power of story really engages, plus I really like to engage with people and it's wonderful to read the reviews where the people are like we really connected with the owner and that means a lot to people. And they can tell there's passion in the product and there's passion in the artistry. The playlist gets complimented five times a day, John Prine Pandora. So yeah, I try to match the music. John Prine feels very Montana folksy. There is a little bit of element of the globalness. My cook just recently joined the staff and he said, James, I've never left Montana, but every time I come in here I feel like I experience a different part of the world.

Matt Wagner:

Oh, that's fascinating. Like you're sort of transcended somewhere else through food.

James Langteaux:

Through food, through drinks, through the way he witnesses how we interact. And he's like, I feel like you're allowing me to travel and I'm getting a little choked up because that moved me immensely.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, it's powerful.

James Langteaux:

Really powerful. And so I will also say this, the team that I have has been just great. It's not always the same, obviously, because labor is a huge challenge everywhere.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, we're going to talk about that for sure.

James Langteaux:

Great. So anyway, I think storytelling is just crucial for connection. I think it's crucial for the neurocinematic aspects that we just talked about for the way it causes you to engage. And people will come back every year and say, I want that cloud that you came in the middle of the night and they'll repeat the story.

Matt Wagner:

They know the story. Yes, exactly.

James Langteaux:

And one last thing that I'll say on the spiritual thing is Jesus always answered questions with stories and I thought, what the hell, Jesus? Just answer the damn question. And then I'm like, oh, we remember. I mean, he must've had some idea about neurocinematic. So I love that. And back to that too, I will just say, isn't it funny that I said I'm ready to go wherever and do whatever and I'm in a town I've never heard of doing something I've never done before having the time of my life.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, wonderful. One of the things that is happening all across the country from sort of a conversation perspective, especially in rural communities, for the first time in legit five to six decades, small communities are experiencing growth. And with about half of all rural counties, in fact, having 2% or more growth. Now that may not sound a lot, but when you're losing population decade after decade after decade, it's a lot. And especially in areas that are outdoor rec heavy and that sort of thing or retirement heavy. And so part of the dialogue that's occurring is sort of the newcomers and locals. And you have done a masterful job in many ways of coming in, recognizing that there is that or could be that kind of component to it, and you're a business owner. Could you talk a little bit about, in some ways tactically, what did you do to position yourself as not like, I'm trying to tell you, I know better than you, but could you talk a little bit about that?

James Langteaux:

Sure. I think, and this just came to me organically... Thanks, that's a great question. It was nearing Christmas and I thought, you know what? I love my neighbors. I'm going to go promote all my neighbors, the stores and restaurants, even other restaurants that I like.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, he did it today. Someone came in and they were very vegan intensive.

James Langteaux:

We're very meat.

Matt Wagner:

Trû North, very meat. And you recommended someone else and you told, go three doors down, blah, blah, blah. And yeah, that was powerful. It was great.

James Langteaux:

And this was even crazier step forward with the TV. I think I was probably itching to do a little bit of TV or something, but I would go and do ridiculous ads for other businesses. I'm talking ridiculous, like I'm in bed with a bottle of wine and I met the love of my life at the Betty's Bottle Shop down the street. And then I would go to the kitchen shop and talk about a pan that I just bought that we're using in the kitchen. And every ad for them would say, and they're just four doors down from Trû North. So it was a little bit of a back end promo.

Matt Wagner:

Exactly. Yeah, that's all right.

James Langteaux:

Which people saw and laughed about. They're like, how many times did you mention Trû North in their ad? But people loved that I was actually pro other even competitors. And I think that was kind of the watershed moment where I think the town just went, oh, he's a team player.

Matt Wagner:

He's okay.

James Langteaux:

He's okay. And then I think, and not to blow my own horn, but I think I love people and so I think they could sense the genuine love and care for the people that came in. And I mean, I've sat and cried with people who've lost kids while we're busy and hugged people that I just met and signed books with love notes to people. And so I think those are some of the keys.

Matt Wagner:

And the wonderful thing is, and I experienced it firsthand being in the cafe, it's truly authentic. I mean, it's not a put on, it's not a show, it's not like this is part of my business plan. It's a natural thing for you to do and I think people see through and understand that it's truly authentic.

James Langteaux:

That's awesome, thanks.

Matt Wagner:

Let's talk about, you were starting to allude to some of some the challenges faced. And again, for people that have traveled or have sort of followed trend lines about where high growth areas are occurring, if we were looking at during the pandemic, the Atlas Van Lines, there was moving trucks going in lots of different places around the country. And sort of the southeast really has grown in terms of rural areas and the mountain west has just exploded. But that brings challenges beyond just sort of newcomers or whatever. There's price escalations on housing or whatever or workforce, and then there are more macro elements of price escalation just in terms of inventory and supplies. Could you talk a little bit about just in general challenges that you face being a business owner in the mountain west and in a high growth area?

James Langteaux:

Sure. The pandemic with the supply chain issues enabled everything to get skyrocketed in price. They had an excuse and things were scarce. Cups, just in the last four and a half years I've been doing this, the prices of just paper products, I watch, it's funny, I watch a person take their cup, then they want a lid, then they want a sleeve, then they need four packs of sugar, some honey, and I'm going 12 cents, 11 cents, 8 cents, there goes my profit.

Matt Wagner:

There went my margin.

James Langteaux:

There's the margin. And so there's this constant battle of customers will only pay a certain amount and then costs don't have that pad, so it just gets real tricky. But my biggest thing, and this is the James act that I grind all the time, is, sorry for those of you that don't like this, but Airbnbs for us are killing this town because somehow most of the available rental housing got scooped up by Airbnbs. And I think it's great if you have a guest house in the back and you live there and do that, please. If you've got a room in your house, it's great. It's like having a bed and breakfast. Creates community.

But if corporations are scooping up available living places, we are struggling. I almost cannot find a single staff member because there's nowhere for them to rent that they can afford. And I'm going to embarrassingly admit this, I have a cook who's living in the storeroom right now because he has absolutely no option. I lost two cooks that had to have moved to Bozeman because there was nowhere to live here that they could afford. And I'm paying more than I think almost any other cafe can possibly pay. So there's no way to move that needle.

Matt Wagner:

Think this is for real, folks. I mean, as I've traveled around, the housing element affordability we think of just in the nature of that this is all about residential kinds of problems or whatever, this impacts small businesses greatly when you are in these fast hyper growth or where there's been this abundance of Airbnb or other kinds of staying and rental housing, like being gobbled up, there's simply no place to live.

James Langteaux:

Nowhere to live. And so I attend as many meetings in the city, they're sick of me because I keep saying, listen, in four years or less, we could be a ghost town even though we're a vibrant, thriving, amazing destination at the mouth of the Yellowstone Park and this has got adventure galore, but if you don't have staff to support restaurants, cafes, and stores, you aren't a destination anymore.

Matt Wagner:

Correct. How are you going to service all this traffic?

James Langteaux:

Exactly.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, it's a huge underlying problem and I appreciate you being transparent in terms of what that has meant for you as a result. I don't know if we're in a new norm situation quite yet amid still a lot of cycles and ups and downs, I'm sure, but could you talk a little bit about just how you've seen your cafe evolve over the years and how are you trying to adapt and think about the future?

James Langteaux:

Yeah, that's a good question. The challenge I'm finding right now is we get slammed with tourists. In fact, every July 15th and after every year I start talking to realtors, I'm like, I'm getting out of here because I'm exhausted. The tourists, we have lines out the door. It's nonstop, it's exhausting, and I might not be 25 anymore.

Matt Wagner:

There may be reasons here.

James Langteaux:

Some tourists, they're great. Some tourists think of us like Disneyland. We must have expandable kitchens. Why is it taking so long? We have one tiny kitchen that serves us in the winter, and then we have the same kitchen when the tourists arrive.

Matt Wagner:

Yes, it's not expandable folks.

James Langteaux:

We don't have walls that move and staffs that come in and have housing. So then the locals pull back a little because they don't want to stand in line with tourists for hours for food. And so then coaxing the locals back again once the season... And they do a great job. The locals are so great. But I'm finding that if I shut down in the winter, I would be much better off. Even though the locals support and it's great, but the costs and expenses don't change very much but the business drops way down. And so I'll end the season with a fat bank account and then work all winter long through the snow and the cold, and then at the end of March, my bank's real low and I'm like, wow, I could have just gone to Palm Springs for the winter and had way more money, just paid the mortgage. But that would not serve the community.

And so I just say, all right, that's just part of doing business and we've got to be here for the community and we've got to stay open through the slower hours and the colder months. And again, I'm grateful that the community does support so much. But as we grow, more and more restaurants are opening and our population is only 9,000, and so I see customers that I go, oh, I haven't seen them in eight months because now they're trying a new place [inaudible 00:24:21]. It's a limited pool in the winter. Does that answer your question? I don't know if I fully-

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, I mean the seasonality aspect of sort of like hyper tourism areas is always... I wonder, given that there has been certainly climate change, we just talked about that in terms of like last week it was like 80 degrees here and then the year before that there were five feet of snow and it's kind of all over the place. I wonder, do you see from a seasonality perspective, is like the sort of off season changed in any way? Has it been fairly steady in terms of I know these three months are going to be my down or has that shifted in any way?

James Langteaux:

Sorry to correct you, we have a nine-month winter here kind of.

Matt Wagner:

So it is like Wisconsin, okay.

James Langteaux:

Yeah, worse, oh my God. I got a Facebook memory today and it was like five feet of snow last year. Look, it's 70 degrees out.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, it's gorgeous out.

James Langteaux:

So I will say this. Kris King, who is the head of a lot of things, but she's the head of LBID, which is Livingston's Business Improvement District, and I'm on that board. She has done most of her focus on not bringing tourists in in the summer, which I think is brilliant because they're going to come, period, she focuses a lot on the shoulder and the off season on promoting Livingston, and she does a great job with that. I think that's just genius.

Matt Wagner:

It's huge.

James Langteaux:

It's huge. Because the tourists will come. There's no need to throw money at that. So I think that's one thing. I am noticing this climate change thing is real. Like this summer, still happening. Last year, like I said, we had probably three feet of snow in the first week of October, and I'm not even exaggerating. And then business just starts to slow down. This year, I was like, is summer ever going to end? We've had summer day traffic at the cafe all October. So I'm loving that aspect. My family just all moved to Asheville and I thought of moving to Asheville a year ago and now poor Asheville, no one saw that coming.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, our hearts go out to those communities in western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee and elsewhere, especially the small businesses there.

James Langteaux:

Oh gosh, my heart breaks. I thought, how are they going to do this? I'm so tired after the summer, and if I had three feet of mud in my kitchen, I don't know that I would have the wherewithal to scoop out and start over, so my heart breaks for them. And there's just nonstop challenges, but it's also an adventure. I'm constantly trying to think, how can we reinvent? I made a mistake. I thought, okay, I don't think there's any way to make more money, but my costs are going to keep going up. I need to extend hours, have a beer and wine license, and open in the evenings. I did all that, put a huge investment.

Matt Wagner:

So that was a shift you made or were going to make or what have you.

James Langteaux:

I did in June. Got a beer and wine license, bought all this equipment for kegs and wine kegerators and staffed up for evenings and created a dinner menu and spent a fortune. We did that for two months and it didn't work. And it's okay because if someone told me it wouldn't work, I wouldn't have listened.

Matt Wagner:

Correct, you had to try it yourself.

James Langteaux:

I had to try it. And I had a person from across the street who had a restaurant. The beer and wine license required us to be open four nights, that's why. And so she said, we tried that James for three years. I was at a pig roast in the valley, and she said, I wish I could have warned you. People didn't think of us as an evening destination. And we kept trying for three years and failed. And I thought, well, I'm not going to be stupid. If they couldn't do it in three years, I'm not going to waste all that money. So I immediately shut it down and I'm grateful. So you live and you learn and you have to try by trial and error. And our food and everything was great, it's just people didn't think Trû North for evening.

Matt Wagner:

Exactly. Sort of changing the perception of what your brand is and sort the identity of the business. Could you talk a little bit about, I think especially in the restaurant business, and I mentioned that my dad owned a series of restaurants, to me, it's one of the sectors of business that's really kind of a mental game. It's exhausting hours, the fickleness of consumers and what their interests are. Could you talk a little bit about the mental game? How do you stay sharp? How do you stay engaged in the business when I imagine there are days that just totally wears you out?

James Langteaux:

Yes, that's the July when I talked to earlier, and it's every year. And I even warn people like, wait, July, I'm going to start talking like I'm leaving. It's all just smoke and mirrors.

Matt Wagner:

There was a little bit of that in our conversation, that's right, yes.

James Langteaux:

One of the bigger challenges that I find is how a lot of people have started to use social media, especially things like Yelp and Google reviews as a weapon. It's become very weaponized, and I wish we could review them because it's one-sided, and you can bend over backwards. I'll never forget, for the first couple of months, I read every review and I was heartbroken whenever someone wasn't happy and I wanted to respond, and sometimes I wanted to respond angrily, and all mistakes. I remember once a lady was like, could you cut our chicken sandwich in half, we're going to share? And we make these homemade buns, so they're very fluffy. Well, the cook cut it and it got all squished. And then they took a picture of this squished sandwich, gave us a one-star review and said look what they served us. So I've learned just, we'll never cut anyone's sandwich again.

But the one-star review thing I feel is really unfair because it's like, well, we didn't murder your child and there was one error and it was fixed and there was apologies made and you still felt the need to go public and a one-star review. I'm just saying this to share with people because I used to leave flaming reviews and I was an angry consumer and I wanted everything on the side [inaudible 00:30:29]-

Matt Wagner:

You were on the other side.

James Langteaux:

... This, and I was the most annoying customer, and I've changed because of this business and I realize there's 50 other people in this restaurant and all these requests are overwhelming and ridiculous and quit being a prima donna, James, and don't flame someone out for a mistake because mistakes happen.

Matt Wagner:

We're all human.

James Langteaux:

We're all human and maybe a four-star or a three-star because you didn't get great service or whatever, but a one-star. I have a sign up that's a chalkboard that says, "We have hundreds of five-star reviews and eight one-star reviews," and it's almost true. And it's like we're either horrible or we're great, and there's no in between. And I would like to encourage people to really think about their reviews because even though we're highly rated, we're at 4.8 usually on most sites, but when we get a one-star review, it knocks that down. That it's weird how much it bumps your average.

Matt Wagner:

How much it impacts that.

James Langteaux:

It impacts. So I think that goes to your fickle... There's fickle people, there's people with tons of food allergies and tons of things that I never heard of when I was a kid. Everybody ate peanut butter and there was no gluten. I've never heard the word gluten.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, you're right. That's very insightful about all the things you have to think about.

James Langteaux:

All of these things. And we are not a huge kitchen. We're a small cafe. And so I hope I don't sound bitter and angry, but it's very frustrating when someone will come up and present at the cafe and say, hi... This is terrible. This family showed up and this lady goes, hi, and very Karen like. My daughter can't eat wheat, water, cheese, eggs, it was everything.

Matt Wagner:

It was like a long list?

James Langteaux:

It was so long that my mind just went, oh my God. And she goes, what should we get? And I said a new daughter. They didn't like that.

Matt Wagner:

Oh, James. Oh, James.

James Langteaux:

Yeah, so those are challenges. If you don't have all the equipment to make all these different special dietary things and then people get angry and then there's another bad review because you couldn't meet all their needs.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, it's so challenging because I think it's the nature of the world that we all live in and where in many ways technology has taught us that we have, in essence, don't have to be human, don't have to care as much, and we have this sort of boundary because I can do it electronically. I don't actually have to have that conversation with you and I can just to be cruel if I want to and not have to tell you face to face. And it is definitely problematic and I wish I had a better solution for it outside of, I always thought, learn the 20-60-20 rule. You have these 20% that just love you, adore you, or the people that like I saw today, the people that you were saying hello to that know you and 60% maybe are just coming in and having enjoyable experience, and then it's like just 20% of society that's just absolute curmudgeon's. You just got to let it slide off and know that there's nothing you're going to do. It happens in every facet of society, and that's just how it is.

James Langteaux:

Absolutely, you can't please everyone.

Matt Wagner:

No, exactly.

James Langteaux:

But I will say this, to go back to the positive because I've just sounded like a grumpy old man. I feel like going back a few questions to I feel like it's something I missed. In the building of the community and the engaging with the community and engaging being an outsider, I found adding a lot of, I'm a quirky, goofy person, so the fact that I'll just shut the restaurant down and blast Prince because they ordered a Purple Rain. Or one day we just had a live auction in the middle of a busy lunch. I just was like, oh, we're going to have an auction, and we auctioned off a baby blanket with a picture of Livingston on it, and a guy won it and paid way too much and probably regretted it, but he got caught up in the magic of it. And it was impromptu live auction.

Or I'll ask if that's an emotional support baby because they can't come in if they're not tied outside. Stupid stuff like that. And usually the whole restaurant will just burst out laughing and it just creates this feeling of like, oh, we're not just sitting at a table, my wife and I from Dubuque, and we're here having an experience, we're now part of a bigger experience and we're laughing with a crowd. And then it becomes almost like you're at a club with comedy and it just makes something very different.

Matt Wagner:

Well, you've given them something they can connect around and I think that's the critical nature of where I think many small businesses that are sort of forward-thinking and understanding the importance of experience is you're creating community and you're giving them something to sort of rally around in commonality or what have you.

James Langteaux:

And tell stories.

Matt Wagner:

And tell stories about it. They're going to live in that memory, right?

James Langteaux:

Right, right.

Matt Wagner:

I want to close out the show like I always do in recognizing that there are other small business owners out there, and oftentimes we don't have maybe the biggest network. We can feel isolated as entrepreneurs and small business owners. And could you share a little bit about maybe your advice for them, things that you've learned along the way or things that you wish you knew back then and that you know now and you want to share to maybe other aspiring or existing business owners?

James Langteaux:

Yeah, I would say, I don't know if this is great advice, but I would say do what's in your heart and with passion. When I taught at the LA Film School, I often used this example and I'd never worked in a restaurant, but I said when a person owns a restaurant and they're passionate about what they do and what they create and the ambiance and the experience, you taste it. You taste it in everything. In the drinks, in the music, in the vibe, and now I'm actually trying that out and it really works. You go into a chain that they're just squirting mayonnaise on your sub sandwich and you can taste that. But you can taste it when there's passion behind everything. And I feel like if you find your true north, your purpose, your purpose is what brings you joy. It's like a tennis racket rings when you hit the sweet spot because that's what the tennis racket was created to do, launch that ball. And I feel like when we find our sweet spot, we ring, and that's joy.

Matt Wagner:

Love it. James, thank you so very, very much.

James Langteaux:

Thank you.

Matt Wagner:

Thanks for the drink here, it's wonderful.

James Langteaux:

Awesome.

Matt Wagner:

Cheers.

James Langteaux:

It's Freezy Squeezy.

Matt Wagner:

Freezy Squeezy, everyone. Thanks for listening. Thanks everyone for listening to the show. I had such a wonderful time visiting with James as he was the consummate host. I felt like I was on one of those food shows sitting in his cafe surrounded by a cadre of patrons, trying multiple drinks and food items that he would throw out at me. Oh, try this one. It actually took up like a table for four. It's not a bad gig, honestly, if I must say. But what I found so unique and I hope new insight for our listeners is really around the importance of storytelling as a component to your business or to your organization. It may not show up directly like some of your inventory being purchased, but it's the part that I believe in a world filled with a widening sense of isolation becomes ever more important to the bottom line.

What James has been able to do effectively accomplishing in such a short period of time is really around cultivating community as a newcomer. Demonstrating the power of authenticity married with good old-fashioned fun, creativity, and communication eloquently showcased in his tagline, simple food for complicated times. Indeed, James, indeed. Thank you, my friend. So as always, if you're a business owner and likewise to my place professional colleagues, I hope this episode has provided plenty of new insights, solutions, and inspiration. And as consumers, please continue to support your local small businesses and tell their stories. They're so important to our local and national economies, and most importantly, they promote and provide quality living to the places we all call home. Now, that's going to do it for this week's episode. Remember to check out our growing library of podcast recordings and other related films of the podcast on your Main Street America YouTube channel.

Thanks for listening, please hit the subscribe button, rate and review us, and as always, be sure to tell your friends, family, neighbors, colleagues, so you all can catch the next episode. I'll actually be back in Maine with an old friend from the podcast, Ross Chanowski of NuMarket, talking about crowdfunding, where we'll be doing a duet chatting with two business owners that actually have been engaged in developing and running a crowdfunding campaign in their own community. We'll set this up with a live audience, which is really super cool, at the recent Maine Downtown Center Statewide Conference in Biddeford and Saco, Maine. So I think that you'll really find it fascinating and illuminating. So we'll catch up next week for more Main Street Business Insights. Thanks for all the support.